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ABSTRACT

To prepare students to live in a diverse world, writing teachers must create a non-threatening environment in their classrooms and introduce the issues of race, ethnicity, and class in reading and writing assignments. One assignment that a writing teacher used successfully both in a writing workshop course for less proficient writers and in a course entitled "Writing: American Minorities" was a personally based essay in which the students discussed a racist, sexist, or unfair incident that they had experienced or witnessed. Students were encouraged to maintain a reasonable tone of voice throughout the essay to avoid alienating the reader. First drafts of the essays were edited by students without the same type of experience. Students were graded on the quality of their prewriting activities, peer editing, rewriting skills, and the final draft. Examples from student papers demonstrating the willingness of students to recognize racism both in themselves and in others and to reject the unfairness of racism are given. In addition to personally based compositions on race and class issues, writing teachers can sensitize students to the complexity of race and class diversity through literary texts. Realistic novels, short stories, and historical readings dealing with racial issues can enrich students' perceptions of the importance of race in U.S. history and culture. This writing assignment also works well in a course that uses a traditional anthology. (The essay assignment is attached.) (RS)

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Jean Mullin Yonke

Sensitizing Students to the Dynamics of Race and Class

We live in a diverse world, and many of us are dedicated to teaching young people as they move from the localized world of adolescence and high school to the larger academic world of colleges and universities. Some of our freshman students come from culturally diverse backgrounds, while others have had no contact with individuals outside their own racial, ethnic, or class group. As educators we must responsibly broaden our students' perspectives and encourage tolerant and understanding attitudes in all our students. Without our prodding, our students generally will not choose to speak and write about race, ethnicity, or class. Thus, we must create a non-threatening environment in our classrooms and introduce the issues of race, ethnicity, and class in our reading and writing assignments. First, I will discuss an effective writing assignment and then suggest some possible reading selections.

One assignment that I have used successfully in both a writing workshop course for less proficient writers and a writing course titled "Writing: American Minorities" is a personally based essay in which the students discuss a racist, sexist, or unfair incident that they have experienced or witnessed. While students who elect to enroll in a course titled "Writing: American Minorities" are perhaps already sensitive to the issues of racism, discrimination, and ethnic diversity and are willing to explore and write about their own experiences, my students in the smaller writing workshop classes were also interested and willing to explore these issues. When I

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proposed the idea of writing on such topics in the workshop classes, their readiness to deal with these issues led me to let them work on this paper earlier in the quarter than I had originally planned. While the workshop students had a few more problems with expression and mechanical problems, none of them had difficulty conceptualizing and discussing a racist, sexist, or unfair incident, and most of them wrote self-reflective comments about the significance of the incident in their lives.

In my assignment (See Appendix) the students must provide specific details about the incident, explain why the incident was racist, sexist, or unfair, and explain why the incident was significant in their lives. I give numerous examples of the types of incidents that they can write about. I encourage them to recreate conversations and the language used in the incident; they can use any language, including profanity or obscenity, as long as they put the language used within quotation marks. To avoid alienating the reader, I encourage the students to maintain a reasonable tone of voice throughout the essay and in their concluding remarks about the incident. When the first drafts of the essays are completed, they are edited by students who have not experienced the same type of incidents. For example, students who wrote about racist incidents give their drafts to students of other races; persons who wrote about sexist incidents give their drafts to persons of the other sex. A number of essays are shared by the class, and the inherent unfairness and narrowness of racism, class discrimination, and sexism are discussed. Students are graded on the quality of their prewriting activities, peer editing, rewriting skills, and the final draft. Workshop students

complete peer editing and rewriting of drafts at least twice before completing the final draft; students in the American Minorities class complete peer editing and at least one rewrite before completing the final draft.

Often we witness the reluctance of beginning college students to move beyond their previous friendship network within our classes. Frequently they prefer to segregate themselves with previous friends or sit with persons of the same ethnic or racial background. Assigning students to work in groups with other students from different ethnic and racial backgrounds helps to break down barriers; this collaborative group structure forces the students to talk and work together to complete the assignments. Indeed, students work together comfortably with the assignment and interact with both friends and strangers.

My assignment is open-ended to allow students to choose the incident they want to write about. Certainly there are students who are singularly blessed with an absence of racist or sexist experiences in their lives; these students can choose instead an unfair incident that they have experienced or witnessed. Each time you give this assignment you will have a different response; some classes will produce a number of papers about unfair incidents (often player-coach conflict or conflicts between friends) that have nothing to do with race, ethnicity, class, or gender issues. Occasionally you will receive a paper that describes an incident that is both racist and sexist. For the purposes of this paper I will concentrate on papers dealing with race, ethnicity, or class.

The assignment required that the students consider the impact of racist incidents on their lives. Most students discussed what they had learned from their experiences. A number of students related their feelings to the experiences of other members of a particular racial or ethnic group. All of the students recognized the harmful effects of racism. Although I have only used this type of assignment for two years with one hundred and twenty students, I have been amazed at the willingness of my students to recognize racism both in themselves and others and to reject the unfairness of racism. I am gratified at the maturity and generosity of my students as they reflect upon the significance of racist incidents in their lives. They refuse to be embittered by their racist experiences; they refuse to condemn racist persons because they recognize the potential for racism in all of us. Instead they remain both cautious and optimistic about their ability to deal with racism. Moreover, they welcome diversity, new experiences, and resolve to avoid racism in themselves. Some examples from my students' papers illustrate these attitudes.

During his senior year of high school a black student from an inner city community commuted daily by bus to a part-time job in an all-white upper class suburb. In his essay the student refers to the suburb as "Whitefolksville." On his daily bus ride the drivers viewed him with suspicion; as he walked the remaining few blocks to his place of employment, police cars followed him, and white residents avoided him. While he had no problems at his department store job, the daily pattern of avoidance and fear continued for seven months. Nothing changed until he requested permission from his employer to come ten

minutes later to work each day and thus was able to change his bus route to one that left him off directly in front of the store. Reflecting on his experience the student recognized the power of media images to influence prejudicial attitudes and the need to counter covert racism with an honest and forthright directness:

> Negative and stereotypical images of a group, race, or class in the media can easily cause people to fear or take offense toward those who have been typecast in the media. If I were in a reverse situation, the racism would have been expressed openly. That in no way makes racism and persecution right, because only people with small minds predetermine who strangers are.

Another black student from a large metropolitan area found that the residents in his predominantly white dorm, especially his white roommate, assumed that he had a criminal background because he was black and from a particular city. He blamed the situation partly on media attention to the high crime rate there, but he also resented his roommate's refusal to talk or interact with him. In his eyes, his roommate could not abandon his prejudices and recognize him as an individual:

> When I first encountered this problem, I thought I would never make it at this university. However, the guys on my floor are beginning to know and see the real me, not some dangerous person. My roommate has not changed. It seems as though he avoids me at all times. The more this continues, I am disliking him and the way he acts more and more. In the future there is no way of avoiding this problem, but I pray that people judge me for who I am and not where I am from.

Another black student discussed in detail how a newly hired high school band director segregated band members by skin color in practice sessions. The student felt that he discriminated against black musicians in the marching band by refusing to recognize their musical ability; he only allowed white musicians to perform solos in class. Fortunately for the students, the band director resigned after one year. Although frustrated and angered by their unfair treatment, this student felt that they had learned from their experience and had become stronger because of it:

> The incident in band brought forth many negative feelings which I never knew existed. These feelings included: bitterness toward all of the white band members, a perception that everyone had turned against me, sadness as though everything Black Americans had worked so hard for was a waste, frustration for I knew I was no longer judged by my ability but by my skin color.
>
> The racial incident in the marching band, however, also had some positive points. Unification of the black students arose from this experience. The experience also taught the black band members to depend on each other for support, making each of us stronger as individuals. The experience showed us that the proper way to react in a negative situation is to be positive and to never be lowered by racial ploys. Segregation remains a major problem in our society. Racial tension cannot be resolved until racial unity had been achieved; thus, separate but not equal is not fair.

Another black student wrote about an incident that occurred when she was eight years old, and white children in her new neighborhood physically harassed her and called her names. In retrospect, this college student acknowledges the causes of prejudice, but chooses to meet the challenge of college life and diversity with eagerness:

> In summary, prejudices are alive and well and probably will never die. I think everyone experiences a little bit of prejudice. Prejudices come from fear of the unknown, and to overcome prejudice we need to be open to new experiences and different peoples. I must always be prepared for the unexpected, especially at a university. Continuing my education at a major university, where cultures are diverse, will enable me to interact socially and professionally with different people. To me, the college phase of my life is not a threat, but a learning experience.

A Native American student wrote about being called a "savage" in grade school. Notice how this student's concluding remark comes close to the Native American adage that you cannot judge other persons until you have walked five miles in their moccasins:

> Although our nation consists of people of all different colors, we must realize that all people were created equal. Our society's language today consists of slang and other offensive words that offend others who have a different background than the ones who are speaking. Language acts as an essential part of our communication and to misuse it in order to offend someone else is wrong. Although people feel that their own personal ethnic background signifies superiority or the best, we still must consider the feelings of others of different color or sex. Racism and hurt feelings could disappear, if people would only exchange positions with one another and realize what other people experience.

A Hispanic-American student wrote about the parent of a neighborhood friend who continually made ethnic slurs and insults about Mexican-Americans. As an eleven year old, the student told the neighbor that her family worked hard and had the right to live in the neighborhood. The man angrily ordered her never to play with his daughter again. For several years the student had little contact with these particular neighbors. She and her family worked

hard and prospered, while the neighboring family experienced unemployment, children who dropped out of school, and a variety of other problems. During an "open house" party for her high school graduation the neighbor congratulated her saying, "I never thought you would finish school." He then tried to give her a graduation gift of two hundred dollars. The student, of course, would not accept his gift. Although angered by her patronizing neighbor, the student also recognizes the potential for prejudice in everyone and one's responsibility to control such feelings:

> Sometimes I still feel angry. I also know that without meaning to I sometimes prejudge people. But I also know that this experience helped me to grow. I learned to deal with prejudice at an early age and that helped me as I got older. And even though we may not like to admit it, I am sure that we are all prejudiced about something. It is how we control our dislike for other persons or things different from us that makes us rise above prejudice.

A student from a multi-racial background was shocked and hurt by a racist remark from her assigned roommate during freshman orientation. In response to her roommate's prejudicial behavior, this student reaffirms her pride in her own racial heritage:

> _____ did not come back to the room for the rest of orientation. I got over this incident, but I now realize how proud I am to be what I am. I come from a beautiful race, who to me, act like every other race. Because of the incident I see how jealous and prejudiced others are because they are not what I am. I am proud to be black, red, and white. I will never let anyone else's comments let me be ashamed of what I am.

Although not the victim of racial prejudice, another student vividly recalls an incident that occurred when she was seven years old. She describes how an older male student taunted, pushed, and called her names because of her physical handicap, but she also feels that the teacher's punishment of the older child was too harsh. Moreover, she acknowledges the pervasiveness of prejudice and suggests that people who unfairly victimize others may have been victimized themselves:

> Undoubtedly, I feel that the boy's actions were improper, but the punishment seemed too publicly severe. Somehow, I had the feeling that Miss _____ discriminated against him. I formulated this idea based on the olive color of the boy's skin. Obviously, he originated from a different ethnic background than Miss _____. Therefore, she may have found it easier to harass this particular boy. Clearly, no one is totally free from some type of prejudice. Thus, discrimination does not have any limitations on age, sex, race, or religion. So even at the age of seven, I learned to tolerate some of society's biased opinions, because many people were probably once victims of similar abuses.

A white student from a small town high school is shocked by a teacher's blatantly racist comments in class and by the apparent failure of the rest of the class to notice the comments. The instructor's comments occurred in a driver's education class. He cautioned female students about the necessity of car maintenance least their cars breakdown in bad neighborhoods where they could be raped by blacks. Later in the day the student witnessed a confrontation between a classmate and his father with the teacher regarding his racist statements. Offended by the instructor's insensitive and irrational statements, the student is also angered that a teacher, who is

supposed to be a role model for students, would use unfair slanderous remarks to emphasize a point in class:

> My biggest shock regarding the entire situation was Mr. K's reaction to this confrontation [with the classmate and his parent]. Instead of showing any regret for using those terrible words, Mr. K could only talk about what the school board might do to him if they ever found out [about his racist statements in class]. This told me that he was only looking out for himself, that he was not even sorry for what he had done.
>
> The entire incident regarding Mr. K's verbal abuse of blacks was one of clear cut racism in the classroom. To this day I will never hold the same amount of respect for Mr. K that I used to. Contrary to Mr. K's philosophy, racial slander is not needed to make a point, or scare someone into learning. Hopefully one day, the institutions which I attend will be free of discrimination of any kind.

Another white student objects to fact that he as a new summer employee for an asphalt paving company was given preferential treatment (training and more desirable jobs) over the more experienced black workers. In his conclusion he cautions us to be alert to the possibility of racism in the work place:

> This situation frightens me because I did not realize the unfairness of discrimination until I really thought about it. Even when I attempted change, resistance came from workers of both races. I am sure that people participate in these situations all the time without any realization of the unfairness of their actions simply because they have grown so used to it. We have to learn to evaluate situations and recognize racism, or change will never come about.

Still another white student in an interracial family reacts to the verbally abusive behavior of strangers who taunted his mother, stepfather, and

stepbrother during a fireworks display at a public high school. In conferences with this student it became clear that some of the student's anger in his conclusion may be directed toward the rabid bigotry of his biological father:

> Being racially prejudiced is absolutely stupid. Somehow bigots need to change or they should be punished for discriminating against blacks. I know for a fact that changing is not hard; I did it myself. I believe racial equality must be taught at an early age. If parents cannot do this for their children, regardless of their position, then the hell with them. If it is just a lack of willingness, then I have no mercy on these fools and I know God will not either.

The above student clearly speaks in a strong voice in his conclusion, but he fails to maintain a reasonable tone of voice because he has not resolved his hostility toward his prejudiced father. The above student's strident voice was the exceptional response; most students maintained a balanced tone through out their essays.

Many students can recall racist, sexist, or unfair incidents, and a few of them will discuss instances of class discrimination. Here are the concluding remarks from a young woman who objects to the snobbery of the wealthy students who refuse to associate with less well-to-do classmates in her middle-class/wealthy suburb. She pleads with young people to abandon their parents' materialistic values and to choose their own friends:

> Division by wealth is unfair. A person should not judge another by how much money their parents have. Wealthy children should not think that they are superior and look down on others. I believe that parents

> should not pressure their children to have the "right" friends. The decision of friendship should be made by children themselves and others should not try to influence them. Although it will take time, I hope people realize the irrelevancy of clothes and cars and begin to see that real friendships are based on persons as individuals.

Since the myths of our culture including the America dream of success and equal opportunities for all tend to downplay the reality of class differences within our borders, students do not easily perceive life experiences that reflect class conflict and discrimination. Nevertheless, students belong to different economic classes even though they generally identify with a middle class. One way to alert students to the existence of class influences on their lives is to have students write a short paragraph on the value of higher education. Discuss a sampling of these paragraphs and let the class find the patterns in the different responses. Often you will find that students from a secure middle-class background with one or both parents having college degrees will stress the intrinsic value of education, the joy of learning, or self-fulfillment. Students who are the first in their families to attend college tend to stress the practical and economic benefits of higher education; for them education means social mobility. Students with comfortable or ample resources do not have to worry about the immediate economic payoff of a college education; they have the luxury of choosing a course of study reflecting their own interests and goals.

In addition to personally based compositions on race and class issues, we can sensitize our students to the complexity of race and class diversity through the literary texts that we choose for them. Realistic novels and

short stories and historical readings dealing with racial issues can enrich our students' perception of the importance of race in our history and culture. After discussing the patterns of Native American and European contact in the United States, I have students read Iola Fuller's The Loon Feather (1940), a novel dealing with English and French settlers and their interaction with the Objiway Indians of Mackinac Island in the first part of the nineteenth century. Students quickly recognize the ethnocentric attitudes of the European settlers, the conflicts over land and trade relations, and the difficulty of preserving traditional ways in a European dominated society. Students can identify with the Objiway-French heroine who searches for a meaningful life amid the two cultures.

Students can come to a fuller understanding of black culture by investigating various historical readings dealing with the social, economic, and sexual dynamics of slavery and of the racial caste system and the violent pattern of lynching that develop after the Civil War. Ernest J. Gaines' The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman is a teachable text that mirrors the lives of Southern blacks from the Civil War to the 1960s. Other texts could include William Faulkner's short story "Dry September" or selected stories by Richard Wright. Another accessible text is Lillian Smith's Strange Fruit (1944), which dramatizes an interracial affair and a lynching. Students respond well to this grim novel and debate the reasons why Nonnie Anderson, a well-educated young black woman, fails to see that her white lover treats her in racist and sexist ways. Teaching Ernest J.Gaines' A Gathering of Old Men (1983) allows the students to explore the forces of oppression in the modern South and to

consider the seventeen elderly men who courageously decide to resist racism before they die.

Students respond differently to the same literary or historical text, and their responses reflect their own life experiences. When I teach Frederick Douglass' Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, I ask students to write an essay exploring Douglass' arguments against slavery and to decide what was the worst abuse within slavery. Non-minority students tend to identify the whippings and murders of slaves as the worst abuses of slavery. Minority students, on the other hand, perceive the separation of slave families or enslavement itself as the most grievous aspect of slavery.

Some students are oblivious to the impact of class in American society. In an effort to introduce students to the importance of class in America, I have them read Edith Summers Kelley's poor white novel Weeds (1923) in conjunction with some historical readings dealing with poor whites and tenants and the special burdens of farm women in the South. I also show the students numerous photographs from the 1920s and 1930s of tenants and their families and the type of land on which they lived. These photos include Walker Evans' portraits from James Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941), Margaret Burke-White's prints from Erskine Caldwell's You Have Seen Their Faces (1937), Jack Delano's photos in Arthur Raper's Tenants of the Almighty (1943), and Farm Security Administration photos in Herman Clarence Nixon's Forty Acres and Steel Mules (1938). While Kelley's novel Weeds can be viewed as a feminist novel, it is more importantly a realistic farm novel. Historical readings and

graphic photographs enable students to understand the complexity of the heroine, Judy Pittinger, who rebels against traditional female roles and poverty, but finally acquiesces to a situation that she cannot change. Another accessible text for exploring class issues is Tillie Olsen's short story "I Stand Here Ironing"; students, most of whom have mothers who work outside the home, can empathize with this working class mother in her difficulties, struggles, and efforts to do the best that she can for her children.

Another way to encourage students to explore class conflicts in literary works involves reading ethnic literature. Often autobiographical memoirs and novels focus on the immigrant's struggle out of poverty and toward acceptance by American society. Some teachable texts dealing with both ethnic identity and class issues include Abraham Cahan's The Rise of David Levinsky (1917), Michael Gold's Jews Without Money (1930), Anzia Yezierska's Bread Givers (1925), Jerre Mangione's Mount Allegro (1942, 1961), Pietro Di Donato's Christ in Concrete (1939, 1975), and Tomas Rivera's Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra/And the Earth Did Not Devour Him (1971).

The assignment on a racist, sexist, or unfair incident works best in a writing course oriented around the study of race, ethnicity, class, and gender issues. Nevertheless, my experience using this assignment in the writing workshop classes indicates that this writing project also works well in a course that utilizes a traditional anthology. Writing courses and literary studies should be more than intellectual games or sophisticated exercises in language. Literature can enrich our lives by broadening our knowledge of the

experiences of "others." If one provides adequate historical background materials and accessible literary texts, students can explore and understand the dynamics of race and class and how these factors influenced our lives in the past and continue to influence us today.

Appendix

Essay Assignment on a Racist, Sexist, or an Unfair Incident

In ten days we will begin prewriting exercises for an essay on a racist, sexist, or an unfair incident that you have personally experienced or witnessed. Begin thinking now about the type of incident that you will write about. By definition sexism and racism are unfair. When you write about a racist or sexist incident, be sure to explain to the reader why the incident was racist or sexist. You may choose to write about an unfair incident that you experienced that did not involve sexism or racism. For example, you could write about a player-coach conflict, a teacher-student conflict, a friend-friend conflict, a police-citizen conflict, a wealthy person-non wealthy person conflict, or an employer-employee conflict. The only conflict that you cannot write on is a parent-child conflict; these types of conflicts often involve strong feelings, and you may not be able to write a dispassionate, persuasive essay about a family conflict. When you write about an unfair incident, be sure to explain to the reader why the incident was unfair.

When you are writing your essay, you should assume a general reader who has little or no information about the type of incident that you experienced. You should adopt a reasonable tone of voice; do not alienate your reader. You should have a clearly defined thesis that identifies the type of incident that occurred and your feelings about the incident. In your introduction be sure to explain why the incident was racist, sexist, or unfair. If possible, include a forecasting statement that indicates to the reader what aspects of the incident that you will talk about in your paper.

You should write several paragraphs for the body of your paper. You need to give the reader some background information about the incident - who was involved, where it happened, what people said, what you felt during the incident, and how you felt after the incident. You are encouraged to use the exact words of the people involved in the incident; recreate conversations that occurred during the incident. Be sure to put all dialogue within quotation marks. If you use an expression that the reader may not be familiar with, explain the meaning of the expression in brackets following the word(s).

In your conclusion explain why this incident was important to you and how it influenced you personally, how it changed your life, or how your feelings, perceptions, or attitudes changed because of the incident. Be sure to keep a reasonable tone of voice in your conclusion.

We will be working a long time on this essay. We will do prewriting exercises, peer editing, teacher conferences, and at least one rewrite of this essay. All drafts must be typed. The final draft will be a 750 word essay; it must be a three page, double spaced, typed paper. When you turn in your final draft, you must turn in your prewriting activities, your editing sheet(s), and your other drafts.

Jean Mullin Yonke is an assistant professor in the Department of American Thought and Language at Michigan State University where she teaches writing workshop courses and thematically oriented writing courses on American Minorities, American Expression, and Women in America. She earned her B.A. in English from Briar Cliff College in Sioux City, Iowa and her Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Kansas. Yonke has presented a number of papers at regional and national conferences on William Faulkner, Ernest Gaines, poor white novels, and teaching women's literature and ethnic literature. Currently she is working on a book that deals with Faulkner's views of Southern culture.